

## Culture and heritage

France is a geographical crossroads linking Latin Europe with Anglo-Saxon Europe and Continental Europe with Atlantic Europe. As such, it features a wealth of exceptional cultural heritage.

This is expressed in the vast range of architecture that is characteristic of France; it can be admired in its many museums housing both traditional and contemporary art collections, and lives on in French theatre and cinema which are increasingly creative and dynamic.

### Understanding France's diversity via its architecture and regional heritage

France owes its status as the most popular tourist destination in the world, in large part, to its architectural heritage, which is exceptional in both its abundance and variety.

Cathedrals, churches, abbeys, *châteaux*, country houses, works of art, and civil and military architecture: each region in France and each *département* or district has at least one of these structures of between 100 and 1,000 years old. These are also sites of remembrance, reminding us and faithfully preserving the traces of times past, of the multi-secular history of regions, and of the life and work of our ancestors.

[Notre-Dame](#), the [Eiffel Tower](#), [Versailles](#), [Mont-Saint-Michel](#), the [Pont du Gard](#), Vézelay, [Chambord](#) and the other Loire *châteaux* are names with which the foreign visitor, who has come to see France and its world-famous sites, is quite familiar.

In France, there are also a large number of small Romanesque churches dotted around the landscapes of the Bourgogne, Poitou, Périgord, Provence and Limousin regions, numerous buildings and monuments in the most diverse styles, and ancient structures which, although they are not designated world heritage sites, all have something to say to those who take the time to visit them. They tell the story of a moment in the shared history of a nation.

This heritage is also a testament to all those, both unknown and well-known individuals, who have made France what it is today, many of whom are responsible for some of the major chapters of European history.

Travelling across France involves travelling through 20 centuries of western architecture (and even more if we take into account prehistoric remains with their wonderful rock paintings), from the renowned Romanesque monuments of Arles, Orange and Nîmes to Le Havre city centre, rebuilt by Auguste Perret in the aftermath of the last world war, following the destruction of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century historical town centre. It is spread over 133 hectares and, in 2005, was added to the list of UNESCO world heritage sites. It is the first 20<sup>th</sup> Century European urban development to be designated as such by [UNESCO](#).

The French government is paying specific attention to architecture and the fact that it is at the forefront of French artistic and cultural heritage. It is undertaking to protect and maintain past treasures and to lay the ground for the heritage of the future by providing training to the architects of today and actively supporting their projects.

Architectural information centres, councils for architecture, urbanism and the environment (CAUE), colleges of higher education, cities and regions for art and history (VRAH), museums and cultural centres: in the last few years, the number of sites for promoting and circulating information on contemporary architecture in France has grown exponentially. Visitors to the [archireseau.culture.gouv.fr](http://archireseau.culture.gouv.fr) website can observe the sheer range and diversity of contemporary French architecture.

France is a country of great open-mindedness that is rich in cultural exchange. As such it has fostered the greatest architects allowing them to express their visions. A non-exhaustive list would include Norman Forster ([the Carré d'art in Nîmes](#)), Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers ([Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris](#)), Kenzo Tange (the Grand Ecran building and cinema in the Centre Galaxie, Place d'Italie in Paris, also the [Museum of Asian Arts in Nice](#)), and Frank Gehry ([the Nouvelle Cinémathèque](#), rue de Bercy, in Paris), etc.

With regard to French architects, the diversity of styles and design on offer symbolises the wealth of their talent. Indeed, certain of them, including Jean Nouvel and Christian de Porzamparc, enjoy worldwide acclaim. The landscape of French architecture is being completely transformed with as many trends and styles as there are personalities. We have only to look at the [Quai Branly Museum](#), the [Cité de la Musique](#) and the [Bibliothèque nationale de France](#) (French National Library), to see how different they are.

Furthermore, France has, over the past few years, rethought the concept of heritage, and its scope has been considerably extended as a result. Technical and industrial heritage essentially includes buildings erected from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century onwards but also other older buildings, such as the famous [Saline royale d'Arc-et-Senans](#). Such heritage has been rediscovered and re-evaluated for its aesthetic qualities and for its obvious significance as sites of remembrance.

Thus, landscapes themselves, the French countryside and even cultivated lands are part of a shared heritage. This ecological and natural heritage owes much to the diversity of the French climate: with a metropolitan territory of 550,000 km<sup>2</sup>, different parts of the country have continental, oceanic or Mediterranean climates. However, it is also a result of the work of men, who, in preparing the ground, exploiting the forests, increasing the productivity of the land and marking out new roads have naturally helped to design and preserve the landscape.